THOSE PIONEER WIVES, WHAT WOMEN!

James F. and Margaret W. Reed
of the Donner Party
Courtesy of Clyde Arbuckle

by

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Experiences of the varied and resourceful men of the days of 1849 are of continuing fascination to us all. But I am also intrigued by the lives of the women of that westward trek. Hence *Those Pioneer Wives — What Women!*

But not all devoted and capable women came in those earliest years. I am privileged to have had long and exciting experience with one who came a half century later, but who had the same fine qualities of loyalty, intelligence, and endurance.

Please meet some of my friends and helpers in attempting the story of these pioneer wives:

Clyde Arbuckle, historian of the City of San Jose.

James W. McDougall of the McDougall Press (he and my son were on the Stanford track team together).

Winslow Wheeler of the Schmidt Lithograph Company.

Paul Johnson of the Johnson Mat and Electrotyping Company.

And especially Fredric H. Busher, President of the Conference Historical Society, and always a friend and helper. These sketches were first run in the *Calvary Beacon,* house organ of Calvary Church, San Francisco, of which he is pastor.

Our Lady of the Snow

MARGARET W. REED

The Reeds were a substantial family in Springfield, Illinois. Possibly they might be called a typical family of the western frontier. Forebears had fled from Poland to northern Ireland to escape tyranny of state and church. There one of them married a Scottish woman. Then to her son came the call of the new West. He ran a sawmill and a small furniture factory. James had fought in the Blackhawk War alongside Abraham Lincoln.

There was no Woman's Club to claim Margaret's time, nor P.T.A. She was a housewife, giving heart and strength to husband and four children. Virginia was now thirteen (no 'teen age problem then). James F., Junior, was eleven. Martha (Patty) was seven, and Tommy three. And of course no family of that day was complete without a deeply cherished grandmother, in this instance Sarah Keyes, seventy-five. Father was a trustee of the church, and they expected to spend much of Sunday there, just as they expected to have breakfast.

Why should such a family, well established in the sparsely settled, promising prairie state, get the westering urge? This was 1845, three years before the discovery of gold. Yet all through that year the careful preparations were under way. It was all the more remarkable as Reed was something of an aristocrat. That winter the three wagons, one very large, were built and the outfit prepared. There were four drivers and one woman to help Margaret. In April of 1846 all was ready. The Reed and Donner Party numbered ninety all told.

The first important event that happened to the Reeds was the death of Margaret's mother. They buried her in a casket carved from a cottonwood tree. The city of Schroyer, Kansas, now marks the spot.

Early summer on the prairie was filled with interest. But this was before the gold seekers had worn established trails. Twenty days were lost in a false move. Then the salt flats west of Great Salt Lake were terrifying. Oxen died. Wagons were abandoned. And then Nevada and alkali.

Here came the tragic Reed-Snyder episode. Up a sandy hill Snyder was attempting to force his oxen. Reed came up and offered to double his team with Snyder's. Snyder was crazed by heat and thirst. Angry words followed. Snyder stopped beating his oxen. He turned on Reed and struck him twice over the head with the butt of his heavy whip, laying open Reed's scalp. Margaret Reed rushed in between them. Snyder struck her also a stunning blow. This was too much for Reed. He drew his hunting knife and gave Snyder a mortal wound.

Feeling ran high. Snyder was popular. A camp meeting was called. The "trial" resulted in Reed's banishment from the party,—out on the desert, without gun or food. That meant certain and cruel death. But that night, while Margaret quieted her weeping children, Virginia slipped out, brought him a gun, ammunition, and a little food, and dressed his wounds. Reed carried the scars throughout his life.

The party reached Donner Lake late in October. A month earlier than usual winter set in. It snowed through November and on into December. From standing stumps of trees cut for fuel it was estimated that finally the snow was twenty-two feet deep. Food was gone. A few mice were the only available supply. The bones of their oxen were cooked and scraped until no trace of flesh or marrow remained. The hides were boiled, resulting in a gluey, nauseating soup, but so long as it held out it could sustain life. Some ate the bodies of the dead to keep life in the living.

The Breen family found a deserted log cabin. Margaret and her children were taken in. The two families had worship together. One day Patrick Breen would repeat parts of the mass, the next Margaret Reed used the Psalms and prayed. Did she repeat those apparently impossible words, "I shall not want,—— surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life"? Probably. When one of the Reed servants died, Margaret and Virginia buried him in the snow and Margaret repeated the burial service.

It is worthy of note that these two families were the only ones that finally reached Sacramento without the loss of a single member. And it was said of Margaret Reed that she was almost the only one in the entire expedition who came through with spirit unbroken and reputation unstained. For weeks the goodness and care of her Heavenly Father never failed her.

It was on October 6, 1846, on the Humboldt River in Nevada that Reed was banished from the party. He went to Sacramento, then called New Helvetia, and to San Francisco, then Yerba Buena. $1500 was raised for relief. Horses could go only a short distance because of the snow. Then the men must carry supplies on their backs. This limited food brought renewed strength—and hope. The return must be started at once. With intense suffering the summit was finally reached, the descent begun. To Margaret Reed and her family the *Sacramento* Valley was indeed the Holy Sacrament.

Three comments:

1. Indians, where encountered, were at times helpful, sharing what food they had, and providing guides. At one rancheria they were reported to have wept at the condition of the emigrants.

2. Captain Sutter was generous and cooperative with relief, as were all, including Captain J. B. Hull of the United States Navy.

3. The women of the party were more viable, more enduring than the men. In December ten men and five women, known as the "Forlorn Hope", attempted to cross the summit. Thirty-two days later seven of the fifteen reached help in an Indian village. Of these, five were women. Only two of the ten men survived.

Three blocks south of the San Jose State College campus is Reed Street. It is fifteen blocks long. Parallel to Reed Street are the familiar family names of Margaret, Virginia, and Martha. Even the grandmother who died in Kansas is not forgotten, for here is Keyes Street also. The first school in this section of San Jose was the Reed Street School. All of this is an indication of the substantial place James F. Reed had in that community for a quarter century.

But the preservation of the family was due largely to the faith and courage of Margaret, our Lady of the Snows.

She Made Civilization Wherever She Was

SARAH ELINOR ROYCE

This is the story of a sensitive cultured woman and her reaction to the dangers and roughness of 1849. It is the story of one who made civilization wherever she was. It is the story of the mother of one of California's noted intellectuals and the foremost of all native son philosophers.

Sarah Bayliss was born in Stratford-on-Avon in 1819. Her first journey began when she was six weeks old. Her parents brought her to New York State. Here she had the training available to girls then,—the old style academy. Of this she made full use and attained a solid education. In religion she represented mid-nineteenth century Puritanism at its best.

Her husband, also British born, grew up on a New York farm. Later he turned to business as a small town storekeeper. He was honest and industrious but in no way distinguished. He must, however, have had courage and skill, as they traveled at times alone on their westward trek. This was unusual in those years. None but a self-reliant man would attempt it, for there were Indians and unforeseeable hazards galore.

In 1848 they moved to eastern Iowa, where they outfitted with one wagon, three yoke of oxen and one of milk cows. On April 30, 1849, Sarah Royce took her seat in the covered wagon with two year old Mary.

They were delayed at Council Bluffs by lack of ferryage across the Missouri. Then came the excitement of accidents, stampedes, Indians and Asiatic cholera.

When they came to South Pass where they crossed the Continental Divide, "A strong desire seized me to mark the spot in some way, and record a word of grateful acknowledgment."[1] So she dropped behind the wagons. "I would make a little heap of stones and mark on one of them 'Hitherto the Lord has led us'. Nobody would notice or understand it; but my Heavenly Father would see the

1. **A Frontier Lady**, Josiah Royce, Yale University Press, 144 pp., p. 27.

little monument in the mountain wilderness, and accept the humble thanks." [2] Then she hastened on to overtake the vanishing company.

Their most dangerous episode came in Nevada. They escaped destruction by the narrowest margin. Their water was gone and their animals dying. Someone had camped there before them, and a few live embers remained. Suddenly a sage brush burst into flame. At the foot of Mt. Sinai Moses had seen a strange burning bush, and God had called him by it. As Sarah Royce saw the sage brush burning she, like Moses, stood on holy ground. God spoke to her, and a strange illogical peace took possession of her in the face of what seemed inevitable and imminent death.

Her son speaks of his mother's reaction to the desert as "very homey and mystical. God's presence was no longer a matter of faith but of direct sight. Who else was there but God in the desert?" And she closes her account of these pioneer years by saying that she wrote it that people "might learn to love and reverence the God who through all the experiences of life ever guides safely those who trust and obey Him."

After reaching California her husband operated a store in several mining camps. They moved from one of these to another as opportunity and necessity dictated.

For several years she had only a canvass roof to her home. Yet she acquired what she understood was the first melodian to round the Horn and enter the new land. She poured out heart and voice in praise. "The cloth walls became a cathedral." It was a strange phenomenon in those roistering camps. The canvass house could not contain her music. Like-minded neighbors would drop in "to have a sing." Then the circuit riding preacher. "These meetings were on every alternate Sunday. The preaching was usually by Methodist ministers, coming from some nearby town or from San Francisco." Unfortunately she does not name these camps. One was quite surely Auburn. It is possible that the now one hundred eight year old Methodist Church of Auburn began about her melodian.

Then the family moved again. She does not name the camp. It was in the Grass Valley-Nevada City area. Could it have been "Rough and Ready," "Poker Flat," "Gomorrah," "Hell-Out-For-Noon," or "Delirium Tremens"? All of these were in that vicinity. "There were very few families, but two or three, hearing my melodian, soon formed the habit of dropping in to have a sing. By and by a clergyman living a few miles off called on us, and we arranged an appointment in our sitting room, which was probably as large as any in town unless it was the bar room. He had appointments in several places, so could come only once in two weeks."

Of her impression of the first of these California congregations (this

2. Ibid, p. 50.

one in San Francisco) she wrote: "What especially aroused my interest was the splendid group of ardent, thoughtful and manly faces,—all so full of deep and reverent attention to the service that made me thank God for making so grand a being as man." In the later groups in the camps one wonders whether Sarah Royce, her singing, and probably her spoken word, may not have made as deep an impression on the miners as they did on her. Yes, she was a woman who made civilization wherever she was.

But Sarah Royce is known through her son more than in her own right. Mr. Royce bought a small farm near Grass Valley. Here her fourth child and only son was born in 1855. His early education, like that of his sisters, was in charge of his mother. She used history, literature, a small encyclopedia of science, and astronomical charts. He was one of the early students of the University of California, then studied at Johns Hopkins University and in Germany. Next he taught four years in Berkeley, and then for thirty-four years at Harvard,—"one of the glories of three universities."

In the closing years of the last century and the opening years of this, Harvard had probably the most noted department of philosophy ever brought together in America. Here were William James in psychology, George Herbert Palmer in ethics, George Santayana in philosophy, and Josiah Royce in metaphysics. Royce is recognized as America's foremost philosophical idealist. Sarah Royce, so well worth remembering in her own right, is known chiefly as the mother and teacher of a famous son.

A final word in justification of the statement that she made civilization wherever she was.

Theirs was probably the last wagon out on the Nevada desert in that memorable year of 1849. It was reported in the settlements that a wagon with a woman and a baby was struggling with the desert. A relief party found them. They must immediately leave the wagon, pack on the two remaining cattle (out of eight) only the utterly necessary articles, accept for Sarah and baby Mary the loan of a mule to ride, and lose no moment in getting over the summit. As they abandoned the wagon which for nearly six months had been their home, and practically everything they possessed, what were the personal treasures Sarah Royce would not leave behind?

Her little box writing desk, containing her diary of the journey.
Her copy of Milton,
and her Bible.

NOTE: I have here used two philosophical terms which may need explanation.

Sarah Royce was *mystic* in that she reached her convictions through insight, through direct inspiration, not by reasoning or through her five senses. Such was her experience on the Nevada desert.

Josiah Royce, also deeply religious but in a very different way, reached his conclusions through reason and will. To him personalities (persons) were so important that their ideals (do we now call them *images?*) were the true reality. These we form mentally, and they are our true our real values, our true selves. Thus Josiah Royce, our foremost philosophical idealist, was the opposite of a materialist. A materialist is one who believes material well-being should rule in conduct.

She Was the Death Valley Heroine

JULIET BRIER

(This sketch points out how a clash of personalities may effect the popular image of an historic personality. William Lewis Manley, the scout of the Jayhawkers, had very limited educational opportunity. He was quite unable to understand James W. Brier, with whom education was one of the deepest passions of his life. Brier was one of the group who incorporated the University of the Pacific, California's earliest chartered institution of higher education. His three sons were college graduates—two were teachers and one a clergyman. The two surviving daughters were graduates of Mills College, the first woman's seminary and college on the Coast. This was an unusual record for that generation in California.

Brier was a tall, slender diabetic. On the westward trek his weight is said to have dropped from 175 pounds to 75. Juliet Brier was farm reared, knew domestic animals from her youth, and knew how to handle them. Manley in his *Death Valley in 1849* has caustic words about Brier, whom he regarded as opinionated and lazy, willing that his wife should do all the work. In this he was followed by Irving Stone in *Men to Match My Mountains.*

The writer has had the opportunity of discussing James and Juliet Brier with members of their family, and also of a careful study of Brier's ministerial service. This has given him a different and, he believes, a fairer estimate of Brier's character than that usually held.)

In October, 1849, a considerable number of the California bound had gathered at Provo, Utah. There were said to be some 250 of them, with 1000 head of stock. Hearing of early winter in the Sierras they decided to take the Southern Route rather than the Overland. Though longer, this avoided high mountains and the probability of heavy snow. They chose as a name,—the Sand Walking Company.

They had traveled some two hundred miles. All was going well until another party joined them, having a map that showed a trail running straight west, thus avoiding the long bulge to the south. Discussion followed. "A clergyman, the Rev. J. W. Brier, was very enthusiastic about the matter, and discoursed learnedly and plausibly about it."[1]

1. Several quotations herein are from **Death Valley in '49** by William Lewis Manley. Manley was the scout for the party. With gun and field glasses he climbed the elevations looking for Indians and searching for possible locations for water. Perhaps he was a bit severe on Brier, who to him seemed to let others do the work while he did the talking.

James W. and Juliet W. Brier and their sons of the Jayhawkers

from a daguerreotype taken in Marysville, Calif., 1852
Courtesy of Howard W. Derby

Finally the party divided, the more conservative and much larger group following the Southern Route, the more impulsive choosing the cut-off. This cut-off ran westerly, somewhere south of the present Highway 91, crossed one ridge after another, with the alkali flats intervening, they hoped that beyond each would be Owens Valley, California. But range after range rose before them. Food was being exhausted. Oxen were worn down and dying.

Because of the exigencies of the journey the single men formed what they called the Jaywalkers, thinking they could forge ahead and later bring relief to the few families. Actually the Jaywalkers made little better time than the others.

On Christmas Day, Manley came in from a scouting trip to the Brier camp. He was quite amused, if such an emotion was possible under the circumstances. "I found the reverend gentleman very cooly delivering a lecture to his boys on education. It seemed very strange to me to hear a solemn discourse on the benefits of early education when, it seemed to me, starvation was staring us all in the face."

The Brier family was made up of father, mother, and three boys, 8, 7 and 4 years of age. The parents were Vermont people and each had an academy education. Mr. Brier's earlier ministry had been in Michigan, Iowa and Mississippi. He had a strong sense of mission, of "call". He was what the Scots call dour. He was never popular. He loathed gossip and fault-finding in his congregations. This made his pastorates short. He would say, "Let us move on," and Juliet Brier went willingly, as she felt he was divinely directed. His disposition seems to have made him more effective as an evangelist and organizer of churches rather than as pastor.

Speaking of Mrs. Brier, Manley says, "She was the one who put the packs on the oxen in the morning. She took them off at night. She built the fire, cooked the food, helped the children, and did all sorts of work, when the father of the family was too tired, which was about all the time."

They were now camped at Furnace Creek, in a great depression a hundred miles long and from eight to fourteen miles wide, and below sea level. Large blocks of rock salt were common. "Every camp was sad beyond description and no one can guide the pen to make it tell the tale as it seemed to us."

It was proposed to send the women and children back to the last spring of good water, while the men pressed on, that they might return with relief. But Juliet Brier said: "Every step I take will be toward California. Neither I nor my children have ever held the party back, and they will not in the future."

Men and oxen died in crossing the cruel valley. At last they found a pass in the Panamint range. But beyond lay the Mojave Desert. At one point some of the men refused to make further effort, including Mr. Brier. They lay down and bade the others farewell. Juliet went behind a rock and prayed. Then she ground a few acorns given her by Indians, cooked them and fed some to the exhausted men. But she got them on their feet again.

Finally the family staggered down the San Gabriel Mountains to the San Fernando Mission. It was March 7, 1850. Their clothing was in rags, the last of the oxhide moccasins she had made were worn through. Thirteen of the men had died on the desert. The four women survived. Juliet Brier, "seventy pounds of bones, grit and indestructability", had saved the lives of her sons, her husband, and some of the Jaywalkers.

Brier is credited with preaching the first sermon by a Protestant minister in Los Angeles. But as he spoke no Spanish, few if any understood him. They went north. Here he served Methodist churches for short terms. Then he attempted to organize a church of his own. This did not succeed. Finally he was pastor for several Congregational parishes. Apparently he was always a controversial figure. Juliet Brier never was.

In addition to the thee boys whom she had brought safely through to California they later had three daughters. Their last home was in Lodi. Here he died in 1898. Juliet Brier lived to be ninety-nine years and eight months.

She Rounded the Horn

ANN TAYLOR

Possibly each of the '49ers thought the way he had chosen for the trip was the most difficult. But since the stories of three of the wives sketched here have to do with the overland trip, suppose we think briefly of one who came by Cape Horn and one who crossed the Isthmus.

When Ann Taylor's husband, William, came home from the Baltimore ministers' meeting one Monday, Ann met him at the door of their home. He said, "Ann, Bishop Waugh wants to send us to California as missionaries. What do you think of that?"

Her immediate reaction was that it was impossible. They had a year and a half old son, and were expecting another child. Also a widowed sister, who was ill, lived with them. How could they go? Without a word of reply she ran into the house. She went to her room and laid all the difficulties before her God. Result, "He filled and thrilled my whole being with a desire to go to California." That settled it.

The first plan was to go by the Isthmus. But reports of illness and delays made that inadvisable. Taylor was able to secure transportation on the *Andalusia,* a Baltimore clipper of about a thousand tons, much superior to the average sailing ships of that day." They sailed on April 19, 1849. There were more than one hundred passengers, one of whom was a physician.

On June 3, as they were rounding Cape Horn in a winter storm, their daughter was born. They named her Oceana.

The only stop was at Valparaiso, where they remained three days. Soon after leaving that port "Satan swooped down on us in a white squall, which snapped our main and mizzen topmasts and all the upper masts and spars and piled them in a confused mass on the deck." Yet "We anchored in the harbor

Ann Taylor and her sons
Edward K., born in Elmira, N.Y., 1860
and Ross, born in Virginia, 1857

of San Francisco in good health and cheer on September 21, 1849, after a voyage of one hundred and fifty-five days."

Taylor in *California Life Illustrated* and in *The Story of My Life* tells of the voyage, but says not a word of any hardships. Perhaps if Ann had written the story we would have been told more about them. But characteristically neither dwelt on sufferings or difficulties, of which there was certainly no lack. With no means of refrigeration, with months when it was impossible to replenish food or water, through tropic heat and antarctic cold, through storm and though calm, they in cramped quarters had the care of the sick sister, the small son, and the birth of their daughter. And the *Andalusia* was probably one of the best and best handled of the many vessels that rounded the Cape in '49.

She Crossed the Isthmus

ELLEN GREEN BRIGGS

The Isthmus of Panama was one of the first parts of the American continent to be discovered and explored.

From the voyages of Columbus on through 450 years few areas have been richer in history and romance. Certainly no part of the New World has seen more of tragedy. When work on the Panama Railway was started in 1850, 1000 Chinese were brought in for construction tasks. But though noted for their endurance, after two months only one-fifth of them were alive.

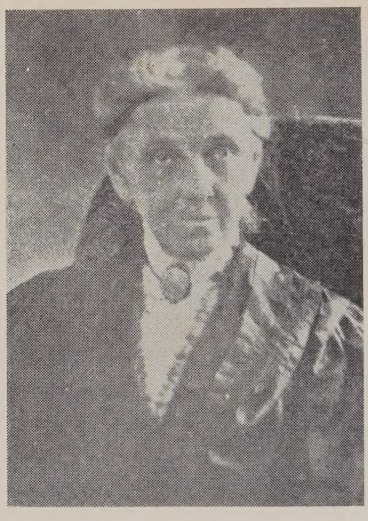
The Isthmus offered the quickest route to California—and the most tragic. The gold seekers followed practically the same route used by conquistadores and their Indian slaves. Over it the treasures of Peru were brought for shipment to Spain. The gold seekers came by ship to the mouth of the Chagres River up that river to Las Cruces, then over the Las Cruces trail to Panama City. Here they waited for ships to take them to San Francisco.

The distance was not great,—some fifty miles from ocean to ocean. But natives with their dug-out canoes must be engaged to take persons and properties up the river. These men were described by Josiah Royce as "lazily clever, with their endless thieving and cheating devices." At Las Cruces the bickering and bargaining must be done over again to get men with mules for transport to Panama City. Then came the frequently long waiting for a steamer, and, as Royce pictures it, "the terrible cholera and the equally deadly Panama fever, the degenerate life of many of the waiting travelers, and then the sickly passage on the crowded steamers."

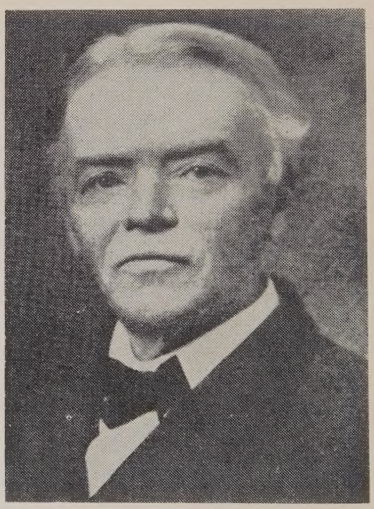
Ellen Green was married to Martin C. Briggs on May 5, 1852. Briggs had gone to California two years earlier, but made the trip east on business for the church — and for himself. She had been preceptress of Genessee Wesleyan Seminary in up-state New York and later had the similar position at the University of the Pacific. In June they sailed for Panama. The most dreaded experience of a sailing ship was fire. This occurred on their second day at sea. However, the voyage to the Isthmus was completed safely. Briggs was a

man of strong body and mind. As he had taken the trip before they had many advantages. They reached the Pacific side of the Isthmus safely. But no available skill could stay the ravages of yellow fever. For twenty-five days Mrs. Briggs lay in a lodging house, crowded with cots of the sufferers. The night before their steamer was to sail they thought she was dying. But she was carried aboard, and her recovery began. Others were not so fortunate. On one day over twenty passengers died.

Ellen Green Briggs lived to rear a family of five boys, to meet all the exigencies of a minister's wife in the new land where in church and state her



Ellen Green Briggs
wife of Rev. Martin C. Briggs



Professor Josiah Royce
son of Sarah Elinor Royce

husband took a conspicuous part. As I remember her in her later years, she was a precise little person in a black silk dress with white ruching at neck and sleeves, and noted among ministers' children for her wonderful sour milk cookies. She used to say in a decisive tone, "There were no hardships."

So here we leave our '49er wives with this closing comment. They were daring but enduring. I do not have at hand the vital statistics of Margaret Reed and Eleanor Royce. Of the others, Ellen Briggs and Ann Taylor failed to reach their eightieth year by only a few days, and Juliet Brier did not quite make her one hundredth. Each of these three survived her husband. All told, the five had twenty-seven children, seventeen of whom were born after their journey to California. Ann Taylor had the largest family,—eight, and the most diversely born. The first came to them in Georgetown, D.C. The second was born at sea. Then came three in San Francisco, one in Virginia, one in New York, and one in South Africa.

So, while historians tell chiefly of the men of a hardy, rough and adventurous day, I speak up for the pioneer wives. They had to endure all that the men folk endured, and they had to endure the men themselves! And three, at least, outlived their husbands.

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